County of San Diego

Single - Family Residential Design Guidelines

January 2012

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1.0 Introduction

The San Diego County Residential Design Guidelines demonstrate ways to design a residential development in harmony with existing community character, and to preserve and enhance those characteristics that contribute to the charm and uniqueness of unincorporated communities. These guidelines are intended to maximize the compatibility of new residential development with the visual character and scale of neighboring properties in the vicinity.

1.1 Purpose and Applicability

The Residential Design Guidelines serve as a reference document for designing residential subdivisions and single-family residences in accord with an established community character. These guidelines should be reviewed prior to applying for any discretionary permit for a residential project and by property owners designing and constructing a new home.

1.2 Planning Goals and Objectives

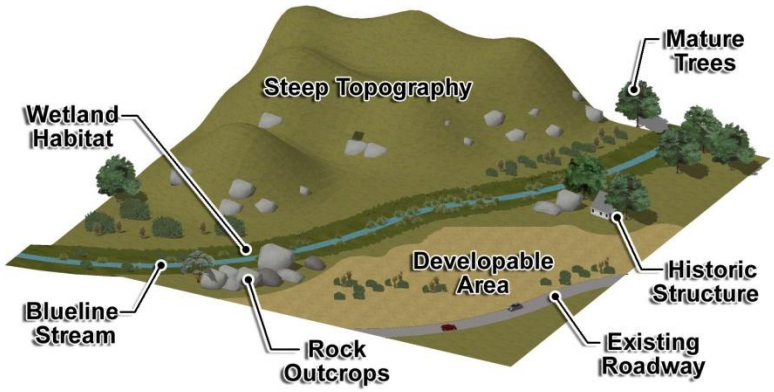
Residential Design Guidelines are one of the many tools that implement the San Diego County General Plan. To ensure that future residential development is compatible with the existing community's character, these Design Guidelines focus specifically on the following objectives:

- Context sensitive design that maximizes neighborhood compatibility and preservation of community character.
- Protection and enhancement of unique and natural resources.
- Preservation of rural and agricultural lands.
- Protection of scenic resources and viewsheds.
- Conservation-oriented project design that responds to rural surroundings and natural topography.
- Circulation network interconnectivity.
- Preservation of interconnected networks of open space areas.

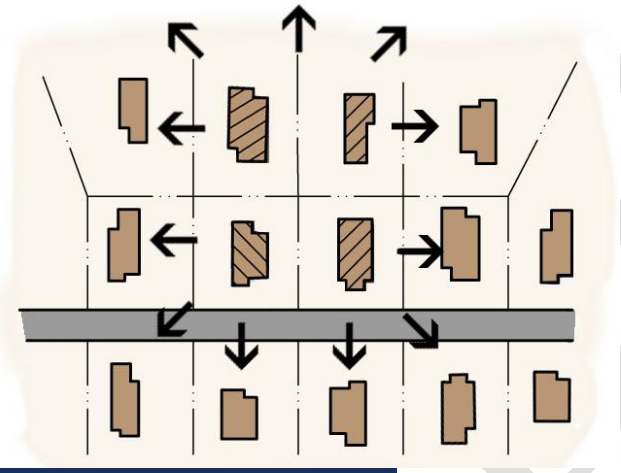
1.3 Relationship to County Codes and Regulations

These Residential Design Guidelines are intended to complement required County ordinances, regulations, and requirements which establish development standards for residential subdivisions and single-family development. There are multiple regulatory requirements that can influence a residential project. County codes and regulations should be reviewed thoroughly, as well as the County General Plan and applicable Community Plan, to ensure project consistency with all applicable requirements.

San Diego County's natural, scenic, agricultural, and historic resources contribute to a community's character.



Mapping existing physical features and sensitive resources helps identify the unique community resources that should be preserved.



Study the community to understand how the proposed development relates to the visual character and scale of other developments in the general vicinity.

2.0 Planning a Compatible Development

Unincorporated San Diego County is rich in natural open space, agricultural lands, unique topographic resources, and scenic vistas. It is also comprised of a variety of unique communities mainly dominated by small scale villages and single-family residences surrounded by agriculture and open space. It is important that new development be compatible with these existing characteristics as they contribute to a sense of pride and belonging in the community.

It is strongly encouraged that the project proponent meet with the responsible community planning sponsor group (and design review board, if applicable) at the beginning of the conceptual design phase to gain a better understanding of any unique challenges or issues within an individual community.

2.1 Community Character Defined

Community character is the aggregate of features and traits that form the individual nature and uniqueness of a community. It includes the constructed and natural landmarks and surroundings that cause someone to identify with a particular place or community. This character is shaped by natural, cultural, societal, and economic forces.

2.2 Identifying Unique Community Characteristics

One of the first steps to designing a residential project is to examine surrounding development to identify the existing rural, semi-rural, or urban design patterns and architectural styles that should be emulated in a proposed residential development.

The existing physical features and sensitive resources that are unique to a community's character, which should be avoided and preserved, should also be identified. Common resources that contribute to community character include:

- Sensitive biological resources;
- Prime agricultural land;
- Wetlands and water bodies;
- Floodplains and floodways;
- Steep slopes and ridgelines;
- Mature trees and vegetation; and
- Historic structures, districts, and other cultural resources.

3.0 Designing a Compatible Development

HOW to design of a residential project that integrates with the surrounding community and avoids sensitive and unique resources:

- Avoid steep slopes, ridgelines, floodplains, floodways, prime agricultural land, sensitive biological resources, natural drainage courses, rock outcroppings, wetlands, and other sensitive resources that are valued and unique to a given community.
- Utilize sites that are better able to absorb development that have existing infrastructure, transportation connections, and community amenities.
- Avoid sites that are less able to accommodate development, such as ridgelines, steep slopes, and sensitive resource areas.
- Allow natural landforms to guide lot design by utilizing topography to create a variety of lot shapes, pad locations, and building setbacks that better blend with the environment and community.
- Buffer smaller lots with larger lots, greater setbacks, landscaping, agricultural areas, and/or the natural topography.
- Design the site layout and building locations around a cohesive vegetation framework and in a manner consistent with the size, bulk, and scale of existing buildings in the vicinity.
- Provide the lowest amount of interface between open space and proposed residential development and ensure that sensitive and unique resources are sufficiently buffered and preserved.

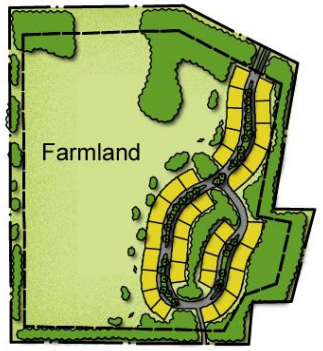
WHY?

☑ Preserving natural landforms and sensitive resources enhances community character by protecting scenic beauty.

☑ Identifying existing patterns of development and locations of unique community resources provides a framework for a compatible residential development.

☑ Emulating the home placement and site characteristics of other residential lots in the neighborhood assists with designing a project that is compatible with its surroundings.

Allow the natural landform to guide development patterns and avoid sensitive and unique community resources.



Clustering homes can protect open space and farmland, which are areas that can also provide buffers between developments with varying lot sizes.

Seek to respect existing views when siting homes. Share the "view."

Strive to provide multiple access points, trail connectivity, buffers from the main road, and separations between residential development and agricultural operations.

4.0 Critical Components of Lot Design

HOW to design residential lots that are compatible with existing residential development in the surrounding community:

- Building pads should be setback similar to the average of existing setbacks on adjacent properties so as not to disrupt an established pattern in the area.
- Lot lines should maintain a linear configuration without unnecessary jogs and turns to the maximum extent possible.
- Design lot lines to assure that adequate areas for usable private open space can be used and are easily accessible.
- Enhance compatibility of residential development and existing and future agricultural operations with buffers and setbacks.
- Encourage the incorporation of agriculture into new residential development, where appropriate, and buffer residences from agricultural uses with setbacks, open spaces, and landscaping.
- Consider neighbors' views in the placement of structures and seek to accommodate neighbor concerns.
- Respect privacy in the placement of the main residence, accessory buildings, and exterior lighting.
- Provide for adequate on-site parking that minimizes the visual impacts of parked vehicles and allows for quick exit in the event of a wildfires or other natural disaster.

WHY?

☑ Designing new residential lots to be compatible with existing development patterns enhances and maintains a cohesive community appearance and character.

5.0 Designing Homes for the Countryside

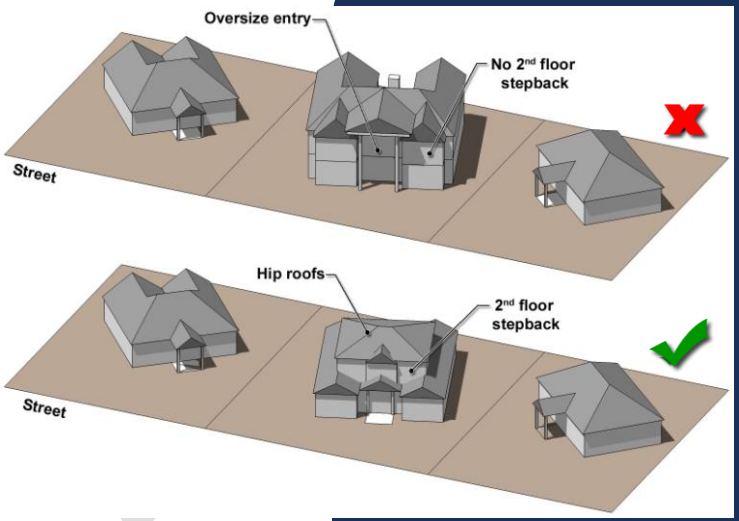
HOW to design a residential project that relates to the visual character and scale of rural unincorporated communities:

- Architectural style varies by community, and therefore, should be governed by community design guidelines, the history, and culture of communities, personal preference, and cues from an architectural theme apparent in surrounding homes.
- A home should not dominate the site; it should complement the existing neighborhood character, providing for adequate space, light, and a sense of openness.
- All materials and colors should blend with the natural surroundings and complement existing structures.
- New and reconstructed dwellings should be designed to appear proportional and complementary to nearby dwellings.
- Minimize size, bulk, and scale through appropriate roof style and pitch, form and materials, varied setbacks, window treatment and location, and door size and type.
- Vary the angle of homes in relation to the street. Not all homes should parallel the road and lots should face the street with the least amount of traffic, wherever possible.

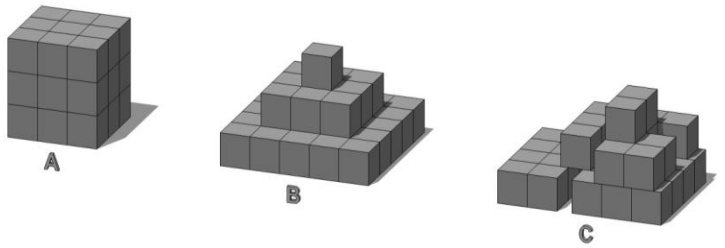
WHY?

☑ Thoughtful site and building design can result in a development that is compatible with the surrounding community, respectful of neighbors, and aesthetically pleasing.

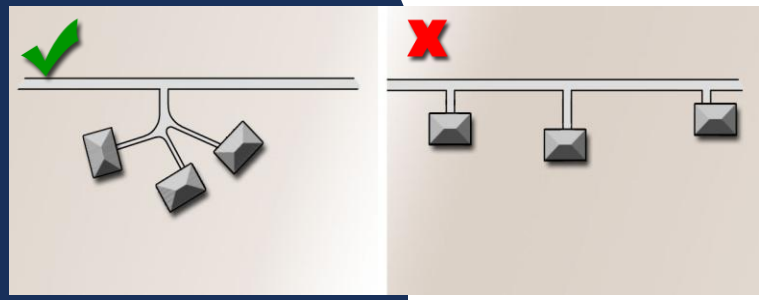
☑ Emulating the home placement and site characteristics results in a residential project that will be compatible with its surroundings.



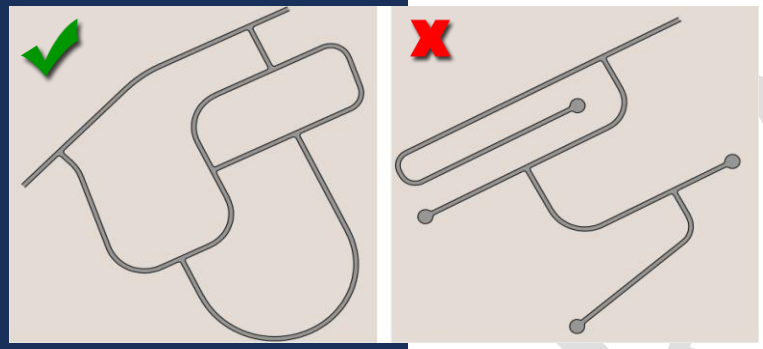
Second stories should be stepped back and smaller than the first story to avoid a dominating appearance. Additionally, varying stepbacks should be incorporated in the façade to create interest.



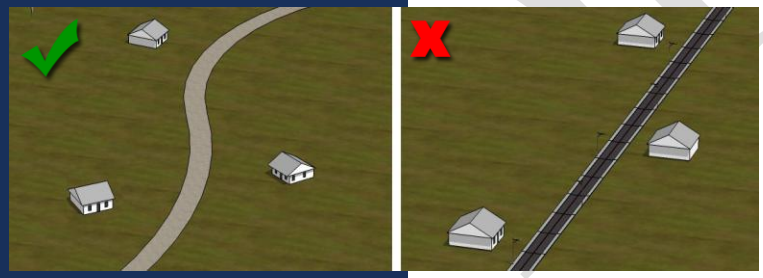
Variations in height, stepbacks, and setbacks help to reduce bulk. A appears bulkier than B even though B is wider. A and B appear bulkier than C even though C is wider.



Limit the number of access points to public streets to reduce traffic impacts.



Circulation systems should have multiple connections and routes of travel.



Utilize road standards that currently exist in the surrounding area.

6.0 Safe and Interconnected Roadways

HOW to design a safe and interconnected circulation system that compliments and improves upon existing roadways in the area:

- Align and construct roadways to be consistent with the existing rural, semi-rural, or urban character of the community. Generally, rural areas have curvilinear roadways and urban areas have grid-like street patterns.
- Align streets to conform to existing land contours and minimize grading. Consider asymmetrical street sections or split lanes to avoid disturbing significant natural features.
- Design a continuous network that facilitates multiple routes of travel and enables vehicles to avoid areas when roads are congested or closed due to emergencies, such as wildfires.
- Streets should be linked to abutting networks and, in situations where future development is likely to occur on a neighboring site, provisions should be made to enable future connectivity.
- Access points to public streets should be limited to minimize interference from local traffic as it accesses Mobility Element and other heavily travelled roads.
- Utilize traffic signals, turn lanes, and other traffic safety devices to lower traffic speeds in rural areas.

WHY?

☑ Roadways that are compatible with existing streets can help retain and enhance the distinct rural, semi-rural, or urban character of a community.

☑ Multiple routes of travel and secondary access helps alleviate traffic congestion and ensures multiple evacuation routes during emergencies, such as wildfires.

☑ Minimizing access points and installing traffic safety devices retains rural character and makes roads safer for all users.

7.0 Minimizing Grading and Preserving Ridgelines

HOW to minimize grading and preserve natural landforms and ridgelines in order to enhance and retain a community's character:

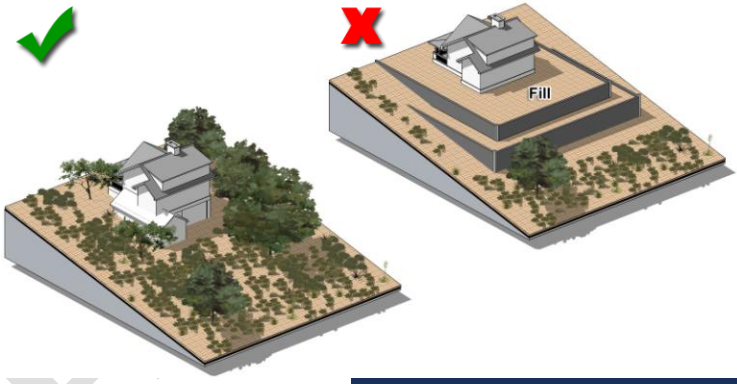
- Design the layout and location of roads and building platforms to mimic the natural topography and contours of the site.
- Minimize alterations to natural landforms and prominent topographic features, such as knolls, steep slopes, ridgelines, rock outcroppings, etc…
- Maintain the existing grade for new dwellings or additions, or limit grading to the building footprint and adjacent usable exterior space, to the extent feasible.
- New homes, accessory structures, and major additions should be designed so they mimic the existing contours of the land.
- On hillsides, grade new building sites so they appear to emerge from the slope rather than superimposing flat areas onto hillsides and ridgelines.
- Terracing or contour grading should be designed with small incremental steps and should avoid wide, large flat areas.
- Retaining walls should be constructed of materials and colors that blend with the natural surroundings. They should "echo" the surrounding natural terrain and blend in with existing landforms.

WHY?

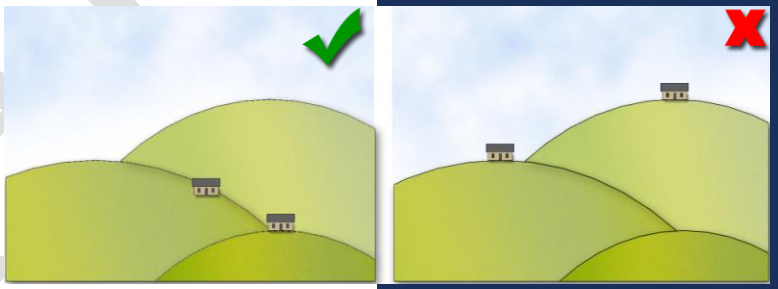
☑ Preserving natural features and landforms protects elements that contribute to a community's unique identity and character.

☑ Utilizing the existing landform to guide development reduces disturbance of the natural landscape and negative visual impacts, and preserves scenic resources in a community.

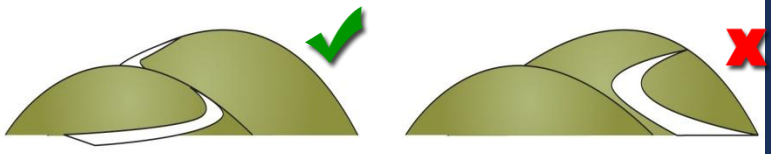
☑ A building's appearance and bulk can be reduced by shaping the building's forms so that they harmonize rather than contrast with existing topography.



Design structures to follow the existing contours of the land.



Avoid locating structures in prominent locations. Locate buildings on naturally occurring building platforms, where possible.



Design roadways to follow natural contours to avoid unnecessary grading.

Provide for trail and pathway connectivity.

Design trails and pathways that maintain privacy for adjacent residents.

8.0 Trail and Pathway Connectivity

HOW to accommodate pedestrians, bicyclists, and other non-motorized modes of travel to enhance a community's character:

- Provide a continuous network of trails and pathways and off-site links to ensure connectivity between new and existing residential development.
- Align trails and pathways in a manner consistent with existing development patterns and choose paving materials that reflect the existing community character of the area.
- Connect publicly accessible open spaces with bike paths and equestrian and pedestrian trails and pathways.
- Ensure that trails, pathways, and bike paths are visible to and protected by passive surveillance from the surrounding community.
- Consider incorporating equestrian trails in addition to pedestrian trails in areas where horseback riding is common.

WHY?

☑ Trail and pathway networks enhance the overall quality of life, improve safety, reduce traffic congestion, and decrease parking demand in a community.

☑ Designing trails and pathways in a manner compatible with neighboring land uses protects privacy, reduces public safety concerns, and enhances the visual character of the community.

☑ Establishing and maintaining a trail system helps in retaining the rural nature and character of a community.

9.0 Designing Multi-Family Homes for Single-Family Neighborhoods

HOW to design a multi-family residential project that relates to the visual character and scale of surrounding single-family homes:

- Attached multi-family units may not be appropriate for built-out communities with detached single-family residences.
- Attached multi-unit homes should respect the predominant single-family character of a community, and should be designed to appear as detached single-family homes.
- Minimize size, bulk, and scale through appropriate roof style and pitch, form and materials, varied setbacks, window treatment and location, and door size and type.
- New and reconstructed multi-family units should be designed to appear proportional and complementary to nearby single-family dwellings.
- A multi-family unit should not dominate the site. It should complement the existing neighborhood character, providing for adequate space, light, and a sense of openness.
- A variety of architectural elements may be utilized to provide façade articulation, but these elements should be visually compatible and match the overall architectural style of the building.
- Buffer attached housing units from existing single-family homes. New development may be buffered with landscaping, setbacks, private open space, and/or grade changes.
- Provide for adequate on-site parking that minimizes the visual impacts of parked vehicles and allows for quick exit in the event of a wildfires or other natural disaster.

WHY?

☑ Attached multi-unit homes can contribute to more housing opportunities and achieve a desired density while still preserving the character of single-family communities.

☑ Multi-family homes designed to mimic detached single-family homes can help maintain a sense of character in single-family neighborhoods.

Multi-unit homes should be designed to be compatible with the existing single-family character of the community.

10.0 References

Relevant County Codes and Regulations

County of San Diego, Consolidated Fire Code Health and Safety Code §13869.7, including Ordinances of the 17 Fire Protection Districts as Ratified by the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, First Edition, October 17, 2001 and Amendments to the Fire Code portion of the State Building Standards Code, 1998 Edition.

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County of San Diego, LID Handbook, December 2007. (www.sdcounty.ca.gov/dplu/docs/LID-Handbook.pdf)

County of San Diego, Multiple Species Conservation Program, County of San Diego Subarea Plan, 1997.

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County of San Diego, Rural Subdivision Design and Processing Guidelines, October 2010.

County of San Diego. Resource Protection Ordinance, compilation of Ord. Nos. 7968, 7739, 7685 and 7631, 1991.

County of San Diego, Watershed Protection, Storm Water Management, and Discharge Control Ordinance, Ordinance Nos. 9424 and 9426. Chapter 8, Division 7, Title 6 of the San Diego County Code of Regulatory Ordinances and amendments. (www.amlegal.com).

County of Santa Barbara, Eastern Goleta Valley Residential Design Guidelines, (http://longrange.sbcountyplanning.org/planareas/goleta/documents/GDG/GDG%20BOS%20FINAL.pdf).

Suggested Readings

Design Review Guidelines for the Communities of San Diego County.

Arendt, Randall. Rural By Design. American Planning Association, 1994.

Urban Land Institute, Development Case Studies (http://casestudies.uli.org).

US Green Building Council, Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Congress for the New Urbanism. A Citizen's Guide to LEED for Neighborhood Development. (http://www.nrdc.org/cities/smartgrowth/files/citizens_guide_LEED-ND.pdf).